

06/23/21 Wednesday

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Israel Approves First New West Bank Construction of Bennett Admin as Settler Protests Continue
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While the Arab Ra'am party won concessions making it harder for the Israeli government to demolish Palestinian homes when it joined Yair Lapid's coalition, the central issue of settlement foundation and expansion was never touched on, leaving Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to pursue an annexationist agenda unimpeded.

The Israeli government has made its first approval to new settlement construction in the West Bank since Bennett became prime minister earlier this month.

On Wednesday, the Civil Administration's High Planning Subcommittee approved 31 new projects in half a dozen West Bank settlements, including Elkana, Mishor Adumim, Karnei Shomron, Kfar Adumim and Yitzhar, according to [Yedioth Ahronoth](#).

The projects include a shopping mall in Mishor Adumim industrial zone, a school for children with special needs in Elkana, and yeshiva and synagogues in both Karnei Shomron and Kfar Adumim, as well as a small number of new housing units in Yitzhar.

Bennett, leader of the right-wing Yamina party, became prime minister on June 13 as part of a diverse coalition of parties that united to oust Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu from his 12-year term as prime minister. While the coalition required extensive compromises by all parties, which includes right, center, and left-wing parties, Zionist Jews and Islamist Arabs, Bennett managed to avoid giving up one of his most important political goals: the continued Jewish settlement of the West Bank.

Speaking on June 13 before his inauguration, [Bennett vowed](#) to expand Israeli settlement in all three areas of the West Bank - A, B, and C - in spite of United Nations resolutions condemning the settlements as well as the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank as violations of international law. Like many Zionists, Bennett views the West Bank as part of the old Hebrew kingdoms of Samaria and Judea, which were destroyed by the Assyrians in 720 BCE and Chaldeans in 582 BCE, respectively, and thus should be annexed into the Israeli state. Accordingly, since Bennett took office, settlers in the West Bank and Jerusalem have pushed harder for proposals for construction and the displacement of Palestinian families to be accelerated.

On Tuesday, the [Times of Israel](#) reported at least 14 small marches in settlements across the West Bank under the slogan of "fighting for state lands," demanding an end to Palestinian construction in Area C, a part of the West Bank under the jurisdiction of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF).

[According to Haaretz](#), since the West Bank's capture by the IDF in 1967, Palestinians have only been given 0.25% of state land in Area C, while Israeli settlers have been given 46%. Roughly 475,000 Israeli settlers and 2.8 million Palestinians live in the West Bank.

While the [Arab party Ra'am](#) won from the coalition a three-year suspension of the Kamnitz Law, which greases the wheels of the destruction of Palestinian buildings, which are often built without licenses and thus illegal, the demolitions have continued. According to [Middle East Eye](#), Palestinians in the village of Khashim Zannah in southern Israel, and in Shefa-Amr, near the city of Haifa, have both been served demolition orders since Bennett's inauguration.

Also at stake is the settlement of Evyatar, an Israeli settlement near Beita [quickly established](#) in the last month that is illegal even by Israeli standards. Attempts by the settlers to expedite the awarding to them of the state land it sits on have been rebuffed, and Israeli authorities have pledged the community will be removed.

On Monday, Deputy Prime Minister Yair Lapid told the [Times of Israel](#) Evyatar "will be evacuated. It is illegal. It is not at all a question of right or left. It is an order from the army and the civil administration."

West Bank Palestinians have protested widely as well recently, including in the "[Days of Rage](#)" demonstrations accompanying the Israeli government's approval of a nationalist march through Jerusalem to celebrate its seizure in the 1967 Six Day War and against the expansion of settlements in the West Bank.

On June 11, two days before Bennett's inauguration, the Palestinian Red Crescent reported that 15-year-old Mohammad Said Hamayel [had been shot](#) and killed by Israeli police in Beita during a Palestinian protest against the Evyatar settlement, which they said cuts them off from their olive groves. He is the fourth Palestinian killed in Beita protests recently. In Kufr Qaddoum, [residents reported](#) Israeli police had stormed their village during a weekly protest, firing rubber-coated steel bullets and tear gas.

Sheikh Jarrah Protests Continue

Meanwhile, in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, violence has worsened in recent days, as Israeli settlers seek to drive several Palestinian families out of the neighborhood. A lower court [ruled in favor](#) of a claim by settlers in early May, but the Supreme Court has yet to deliver its decision after the families appealed.

On Monday, video emerged of Israeli police raiding a home in the neighborhood and using stun grenades on the residents. The following day, Palestinian and Jewish protesters in the neighborhood [threw objects](#), including fire bombs, at each other, and Israeli police responded by spraying Palestinians with skunk water and arresting at least four protesters. Another 20 were reportedly injured.

Similar violence in early May helped to spark an 11-day war after Israeli police raided Al-Aqsa Mosque in Old Jerusalem, injuring hundreds of Muslim worshippers in response to protests at the nearby Damascus Gate. When Hamas in the Gaza Strip fired off rockets they said were in Al-Aqsa's defense, the IDF [replied with airstrikes](#), which by the end of the conflict on May 21 had killed more than 250 people. Hamas rockets killed 13 in Israel, as most of them were intercepted by the Iron Dome air defense system.

Edit: A previous version of this story said Evyatar was a Palestinian settlement. It is Israeli.

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Xi Chats With Tianhe Taikonauts as China's Main Rocket Maker Talks Manned Mars Missions
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

China's first taikonauts to visit the new Tiangong space station have gotten a chance to test out some of the core module's new features, including living spaces and amenities. However, while this leg of the Chinese space program is just beginning, some engineers are looking much further ahead, to sending taikonauts to Mars.

On Wednesday, taikonauts Liu Boming, Tang Hongbo, and Nie Haisheng held a video chat with Chinese President Xi Jinping that was broadcast live on China Central Television.

Tianhe, the core module of the Tiangong space station, was launched into orbit on April 29, 2021. After two unmanned cargo vessels delivered goods to the station, the three taikonauts [blasted off](#) from Earth on June 17 in the Shenzhou 12 mission, China's seventh manned space mission, and arrived at Tianhe a few hours later.

"You are the first astronauts stationed in the core module Tianhe and will stay in space for three months," Xi told the trio, according to [Xinhua News Agency](#). "We all care about you very much." The three taikonauts will stay on Tianhe for three months, readying its systems for subsequent missions and testing out new technologies that range from four docking ports to ion engines for maneuvering and even realistic [space food](#).

A constellation of three Tianlian tracking and relay satellites help the space station maintain a connection with ground control [at 5G speeds](#) of roughly 1.2 gigabits per second. Because of their array, Tianhe is connected to the ground 90% of the time.

Yi Yusheng, chief designer of the space station's measurement, control and communication subsystem at the China Academy of Space Technology, [told the Global Times](#) the taikonauts could use the internet connection like any other down on Earth, including exchanging emails, holding video calls, and even streaming TV programs.

"They can also have private phone calls with their families using a special telephone, which will not be heard by any of the ground control staff," Yi said.

Other tasks they have engaged in include unloading supplies from the unmanned Tianzhou supply craft and preparing the station's equipment for an eventual manned spacewalk. The station's [huge robotic arm](#) was described by Global Times as "the most complex and most intelligent system in space," and its 25-ton loading capacity is capable of moving the station's space lab modules, greatly aiding the taikonauts in their tasks.

A series of scientific research and telescope modules are expected to follow in the coming years, with the fully assembled station being about one-fifth the mass of the International Space Station and roughly equivalent to the Russian Mir space station, which was the largest man-made object in space until it was retired and deorbited in 2001.

However, China's space program isn't just looking at low-Earth orbit: Wang Xiaojun, head of the state-owned China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology (CALT), is already thinking about sending taikonauts to Mars.

Wang told the [Global Times Wednesday](#) that in the wake of the successful Tianwen-1 Mars probe, he envisions three stages to a manned mission to the Red Planet. The first stage is technology preparation, in which androids are sent to Mars to explore a potential base site and send back soil samples. In the second stage, humans travel to Mars and begin construction of a

Mars base. The third stage is the establishment of a steady stream of cargo shuttles and the larger-scale colonization of Mars.

All of this, he says, could be begun by 2043. However, the China National Space Administration (CNSA) is only [looking at beginning](#) a manned lunar base by 2036 - a project it revealed in April to be working with Russia's Roscosmos on.

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Palestinian President Abbas Pledges Cooperation With Bennett if Israel 'Stops Aggression' by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While Palestinian public opinion seems to be slowly shifting toward Hamas, which stands defiant in front of Israel, much of the shift seems to be driven by frustration with the administration of Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who has solidified power since his 2006 election.

Abbas said Wednesday he would work with the new Israeli administration, which is headed by Yamina leader Naftali Bennett, a staunch opponent of Palestinian statehood.

"There was - and still is - a crisis of government in Israel. The new government, the change government, won by one vote," Abbas said in speech in Ramallah aired on Palestinian television, according to [Yedioth Ahronoth](#). "We will deal with whoever the Israeli people choose. So we will deal with them."

"However, it all depends on [Israel] stopping aggression against the Palestinians, resolving our underlying issues and starting negotiations to reach a permanent solution to the conflict," he added.

Bennett, who became prime minister as part of a coalition deal with Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid and five other parties, is a strong opponent of Palestinian statehood and favors annexation of the West Bank. Earlier on Wednesday, his [government signed off](#) on the first new construction projects in Israeli settlements in the West Bank since he was inaugurated on June 13. Israel seized the West Bank in 1967 and has settled roughly 475,000 Jews in the territory, who enjoy preferential rights compared to the roughly 2.8 million Palestinians who live there.

For the first time, an Arab party is also part of the Israeli government too: the conservative Arab Joint List, or Ra'am, is part of Lapid's coalition as well. By joining the government, Ra'am also extracted [considerable concessions](#) from his Zionist partners for Palestinians living in Israel, including recognition for Bedouin communities in the Negev and a three-year pause on the Kaminitz Law, making demolition of illegal Palestinian homes harder. However, Ra'am is a small party that lacks widespread Palestinian support.

The PNA has been cautious of the new government, which has billed itself as a "government of change," primarily for ending Benjamin Netanyahu's 12-year reign as prime minister.

"This time, a government without Netanyahu was formed in Israel," the Palestinian Authority [Foreign Ministry said](#) when Bennett was inaugurated. "However, it is inaccurate to call it a 'government of change,' unless one means to say that Netanyahu is no longer there. As for [the

new government's] policies, we estimate that will see no difference, or perhaps even worse ones."

Hamas spokesperson Fawzi Barhum also said at the time that "no matter the form of the Israeli government, it will not change the nature of our dealings with [Israel]. It is a settlement occupation entity that must be resisted and from which our rights must be wrested by any and all forms of resistance, foremost of which is armed struggle."

The United Nations partition that established the state of Israel in the territory of British Palestine in 1948 was supposed to also create an independent Palestinian state as well as leave Jerusalem as an independent, international city. However, in the war that ensued with several Arab states, Israel seized territory far beyond the partition borders and in 1967 captured the entire West Bank and East Jerusalem as well as several other territories. The UN has decried these as illegal occupations, and in 1988, amid the First Intifada uprising, Palestinian leaders issued a declaration of independence. The peace negotiations that ended the uprising in 1994 were to lead toward a so-called two-state solution, but Israeli settlement of the West Bank only accelerated.

Abbas Tries to Head Off Hamas

According to the Yedioth, Abbas also said Wednesday that the PNA is the only legal body who can be trusted with relief money being sent to Gaza by the Qatari government in the wake of the 11-day Israeli bombardment last month. He called on Doha to transfer the cash to his government.

More than 250 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed in the war, and thousands of homes in Gaza were [damaged or destroyed](#). According to government estimates, \$350 million in damage resulted from Israeli bombs.

Abbas' comments mirror those made by US Secretary of State Antony [Blinken last month](#) after he traveled to the West Bank to pledge \$75 million in development and economic assistance, including \$5.5 million in "immediate disaster assistance" for Gaza and about \$32 million for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). However, Blinken said it was essential that none of the money go toward helping Hamas, which is the governing party in Gaza and which the US and Israel consider to be a terrorist organization. Hamas carried the territory in the last Palestinian elections, which were held in 2006. Abbas was brought to power in the same elections, but the differences between his moderate Fatah party and the more radical Hamas soon manifested into a split in which the Gaza Strip became de facto autonomous.

At the time of Blinken's speech, Hamas' Gaza chief, [Yahya Sinwar, called](#) it out as a trick to keep Fatah and Hamas divided.

"We will never fall for this trick and lash out at each other," Sinwar said.

Abbas had attempted to hold new Palestinian elections earlier this year, but [called them off](#) in April after Israeli authorities refused to allow Palestinian East Jerusalemites to participate in them. About 150,000 Palestinians live in the part of East Jerusalem and the West Bank outside the separation wall, and their neighborhoods have become the front lines of the struggle between Palestinians and Israeli settlers seeking to evict them and resettle their communities with Jews.

Support for Hamas Rises

In the leadup to the elections, which were to have been held in May and July, [polls showed that](#) while more voters would select the Fatah list than the Hamas list, neither would be able to form a majority in the Legislative Council. Further, in the presidential election, Abbas was [likely to lose](#) to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, who would win 50% of the vote to the incumbent's 43%. In the wake of the 11-day war which lasted from May 10 to May 21, in which Hamas fired thousands of rockets into Israel and the Israeli Defense Forces bombarded Gaza with aircraft and artillery, Palestinians' estimation of the militant group only increased.

A poll by the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research conducted between June 9 and June 12 [found that 40%](#) of Palestinians surveyed would vote for Hamas and 30% would vote for Fatah. Further, in a presidential election, 59% would vote for Haniyeh and 27% would vote for Abbas.

However, the polls also suggested there is widespread dissatisfaction specifically with Abbas. If Haniyeh ran against Fatah leader and legendary Palestinian militant Marwan Barghouti instead of Abbas, Barghouti would handily defeat the Hamas candidate by 51% to 26%. The polls also showed that 66% of those surveyed believed Abbas had delayed the elections over fear of the results, with just 25% believing the official story of a delay caused by East Jerusalem's exclusion. Sixty-five percent said they opposed his decision to call off the vote.

Earlier this week, Gazans delivered a list of demands they said were necessary to maintain the ceasefire, including allowing the Qatari aid to be transferred into Gaza, but also the expansion of Gaza's restricted fishing zone and the reopening of border crossings, which allow some amounts of trade with the outside world.

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Florida Gov. DeSantis Signs Law Requiring University Students, Staffers to Identify Beliefs
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Within recent months, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (R) has passed legislation to defend "religious freedom" in schools, and pledged to push back against the "indoctrination of students" through teachings such as critical race theory, an academic framework that analyzes how US policies - in education, housing, etc. - uphold systemic racism today.

DeSantis signed a new bill into law on Tuesday that calls for Florida's public colleges and universities to survey the beliefs and viewpoints of their students, faculty members and staffers. Per [the bill - HB 233](#) - the annual survey will "assess intellectual freedom and viewpoint diversity" at public institutions of higher learning. It also details the assessment will provide officials with an idea of whether students, faculty members and staffers "feel free to express beliefs and viewpoints on campus and in the classroom."

Prior to DeSantis' signing of the proposed legislation, the bill encountered pushback from Democratic lawmakers in the state's House and Senate.

Florida Sen. Lori Berman (D) questioned if the information obtained from the surveys would be weaponized to "punish or reward" public colleges or universities. She also asked if the jobs of faculty members or staffers would be put in jeopardy over the survey.

Florida Sen. Ray Rodrigues (R), the bill's sponsor, denied the legislation would do what Berman posed.

Indeed, the bill does not detail what the results of the new assessment entail.

However, DeSantis has expressed that some schools may lose funding if they are caught "indoctrinating" students.

"That's not worth tax dollars and that's not something that we're going to be supporting moving forward," the Republican governor said during a Tuesday news conference in Fort Myers, Florida, as reported by the [Miami Herald](#).

DeSantis argued that while public university campuses used to be a place where students were "exposed to a lot of different ideas," they are becoming "hotbeds for stale ideology."

The legislation will go into effect on July 1, and comes as one of three education bills signed by the Republican governor on Tuesday, including legislation on the expansion of civics education in public K-12 schools.

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Top US General Says Afghan Forces Can 'Defend Their Country' Amid Taliban Gains in Region by [Evan Craighead](#)

Last week, both US Department of Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Appropriations Committee that there was a "medium" level of risk regarding terrorist groups potentially reconstituting in Afghanistan. Austin estimated that such a move would take "possibly two years."

Milley, the highest-ranking officer in the US military, emphasized to the US House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday that the Taliban's recent seizures of district centers in Afghanistan have caused concern, but not enough concern to warrant US action.

"There's 81 district centers that are currently, we think, are underneath Taliban control. That's out of 419 district centers," Milley asserted to the committee, as [reported by The Hill](#). "There's no provincial capital that is underneath Taliban control, and there's 34 of those."

The top US general went on to acknowledge that while the "Taliban are sniping at and picking off outposts, etc., and they have seized some district centers," many were seized before US troops began withdrawing from the region.

"Sixty percent of the 81 were seized last year, and the others since the last two months or so," he said. "So, yes, we're concerned, we're watching it, but there's a 300,000, plus or minus, military force, Afghanistan army and police force, and it is their job to defend their country."

Pentagon Secretary Austin also highlighted that while the Taliban "made some gains where they have surrounded some of the provincial capitals," none of those capitals have been overtaken.

Their testimonies came the same day as White House [Press Secretary Jen Psaki's claim](#) that US troops and Afghan forces would have faced "elevated attacks" if Washington did not pull out of Afghanistan.

"We have not seen an increase in attacks on our military presence since February 2020," she told reporters on Wednesday. "And we also assess that had we not begun to draw down

violence would have increased against us as well after May 1 because that was what the Taliban was clearly conveying. So the status quo in our view was not an option." The US has pledged to finalize its withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. Over the weekend, Taliban fighters were able to take control of Imam Sahib, a key district in Afghanistan's northern Kunduz province. The area is located on the country's border with the Central Asian country of Tajikistan. Yodgor Fayzov, governor of Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region, [noted on Wednesday](#) that the region's "border guard is on high alert in case of possible state border violations.

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Former Nickelodeon Star Drake Bell Pleads Guilty to Felony Attempted Endangerment of a Child
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this month Drake Bell, full name Jared Drake Bell, was booked in Ohio's Cuyahoga County Jail and pleaded not guilty to disseminating matter harmful to juveniles and attempted endangering children. The 34-year-old actor, whose music artist name is Drake Campana, famously starred in the 2004 to 2007 run of "Drake and Josh" on Nickelodeon. Bell, a resident of West Hollywood, California, pleaded guilty to attempted endangerment of a child - a fourth-degree felony - and the dissemination of matter harmful to juveniles - a first-degree misdemeanor.

"My understanding is there's been a plea agreement reached where the defendant will plead guilty to count one attempted endangering children, a felony in the fourth degree [and] plead guilty to count two: disseminating matter harmful to juveniles, a misdemeanor the first degree," According to court records, a then 15-year-old victim filed a report with authorities in October 2018 regarding an incident that happened with Bell at a nightclub in Cleveland, Ohio, in 2017.

Prosecutors say that Bell, who was on tour around the time of the incident, created a risk of harm by allowing the minor to attend his concert. Investigators also determined that Bell had established a relationship with the 15-year-old prior to the 2017 incident. Bell's sentencing is scheduled for July 12. Bell faces up to two years behind bars, and a fine of up to \$5,000. Back in December 2015, Bell was arrested for suspicion of driving under the influence in Glendale, California. He was subsequently convicted and sentenced to 96 hours behind bars. However, he only served a single day in jail, due to good behavior. Bell was also convicted of driving under the influence in 2010, months after he was booked on the charge in San Diego, California.

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Antivirus Mogul John McAfee Found Dead in Spanish Prison After Court Approves Extradition by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, the Spanish National Court ruled in favor of extraditing John McAfee, the founder of the McAfee antivirus software, to the US over tax-related criminal charges that were filed by prosecutors in Tennessee.

Officials with the Justice Department in Catalonia confirmed on Wednesday that John McAfee was found dead inside his jail cell, hours after the Spanish High Court [ruled in favor](#) of extraditing him to the US.

Sources with knowledge of the development told local outlet [El Periodico](#) that McAfee had committed suicide, and that prison staff attempted to resuscitate McAfee without success.

Authorities with the department have indicated that signs suggest McAfee died as a result of suicide, but that an investigation into the incident is presently ongoing.

McAfee had been held at the Brians 2 Penitentiary Center in Spain's Barcelona since late 2020, as he awaited the judge's ruling in his extradition case. Spanish outlet El Mundo [reported](#) that the mogul had been held in the facility's module 1 wing.

Incidentally, McAfee previously tweeted in [November 2019](#) and later in [October 2020](#), days after his arrest, that if he ever dies by "suicide," it wasn't done by his hand.

The 75-year-old antivirus software founder had initially been detained by Spanish law enforcement officials in October 2020 while at the Barcelona airport. Earlier this month, McAfee [testified](#) in court that the tax-related charges filed in the US were politically motivated, and that if he were extradited back to the US, he would remain behind bars for the rest of his life.

Carlos Bautista, the Spanish prosecutor involved in the extradition procedures, later argued that McAfee was simply trying to avoid having to pay taxes on earned income. The prosecutor remarked that McAfee was a "millionaire who doesn't want to pay taxes."

An [indictment](#) filed by prosecutors in Tennessee and later publicly released by the US Department of Justice (DoJ) in October 2020 alleges that McAfee attempted to "evade" the US Internal Revenue Service by "concealing" assets, such as real estate property and a yacht, by placing them in the name of "others."

The offenses reportedly took place between 2014 and 2018.

Additionally, it's worth noting that the DoJ release came after the US Securities and Exchange Commission filed their own charges against McAfee using "his fame" to prompt cryptocurrencies without disclosing that he was a paid promoter of the product. He was alleged to have earned over \$23.1 million in undisclosed income.

The Spanish court ultimately chose to approve McAfee's extradition on Wednesday based on charges that stemmed to his 2016, 2017 and 2018 tax returns.

'Adventure,' Murder & Self-Imposed Exile

After having become a prominent technology aficionado and earning millions through his security software startup McAfee Associates, McAfee went on to become a self-proclaimed

"lover of women, adventure and mystery," with a dose of various arrests that took place around the world.

One of the more oddball situations that McAfee found himself unfolded in 2012, when he became the main suspect in a murder investigation in Belize. Although McAfee was never charged with a crime at the time, investigators believed that McAfee may have killed his neighbor in the Central American country after the pair engaged in a dispute over McAfee's guard dogs.

In the days that followed the neighbor's death, McAfee fled Belize over beliefs that the local authorities would torture and kill him after placing the mogul in their custody. The claim, however, was later written off by former Belizean Prime Minister Dean Barrow, who deemed McAfee "[bonkers](#)."

While McAfee had no issue with boasting about his sexual exploits and distaste over the antivirus program he created, he eventually found his way back into the limelight more recently after boasting about his refusal to pay his taxes, daring the IRS to come and [find him instead](#). It was as prosecutors in Tennessee worked their case against McAfee that he opted to live in exile with his wife, Janice, on their yacht. However, not all was smooth sailing as McAfee was eventually detained in the Dominican Republic for carrying military-style weapons. Although he was later sent to the UK, by the time 2020 came around, McAfee found himself in the custody of Spanish authorities.

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Democratic Socialist Candidate Bests Four-Term Incumbent in Buffalo Mayoral Primary
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The heavily Democratic city of Buffalo, New York, has not seen a Republican official clinch the mayoral post since 1965, a decades-old dip for the GOP that also saw no Republican candidate listed as an option for the city's 2021 mayoral primary. All three candidates for the race were registered as Democrats.

India Walton, a nurse, community activist and self-declared Democratic Socialist, recently managed to topple the reign of four-term incumbent Byron Brown, setting the stage for her to become the first socialist mayor of a major city in over 60 years.

Walton was endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America and the Working Families Party, and ran her platform with a focus on serving the community, with public health, neighborhood stabilization and fiscal responsibility being her primary concerns.

The 38-year-old activist has also detailed that her priorities will be adopting sanctuary city rules, implementing tenant protections and shifting law enforcement officials away from responding to mental health calls, among other [initiatives](#).

With all in-person votes accounted for, Walton has held onto a seven-point lead over Brown, who has yet to concede the race after [telling reporters](#) that he will be waiting to "make sure every single vote it counted."

The Associated Press called the race in Walton's favor early Wednesday, once it became clear there was an insufficient amount of absentee ballots for Brown to take a lead against the progressive challenger.

As for Walton, she declared a victory late Tuesday. A video captured by the Buffalo News shows the moment in which a jubilant Walton called her mother, saying "Mommy, I won. Mommy, I'm the mayor of Buffalo. Well, not until January, but, yeah."

In a [statement](#) to the New York Times, Walton underscored that the win in Buffalo proved that "a progressive platform that puts people over profit is both viable and necessary," and that the results show that "Buffalonians demand community-minded, people-focused government."

"For too long, we've seen our city work for politicians, for developers, for the police union, but not for ordinary working families," she added. "In our city, everyone will have a seat at the table."

If Walton moves on to also claim a win in the November general election, she will effectively become the first socialist mayor of a major American city since 1960, when Frank Zeidler, who was a member of the Socialist Party of America, served as mayor of Milwaukee, Wisconsin from 1948 to 1960.

When asked whether she truly considers herself a socialist, Walton doubled down, immediately telling a reporter, "Oh, absolutely."

A win in November would also see Walton become the first woman to serve as mayor of the Empire State's second-largest city.

Walton managed to score the win largely through a grassroots effort that saw individuals spreading the word about her campaign, as well as receiving strong backing from the likes of actress Cynthia Nixon, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and the Working Families Party.

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Fauci: Delta Variant Accounts for 20% of New US COVID-19 Cases, May Become Dominant Strain Soon

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

B.1.617.2, also known as the Delta variant, was first detected in India and has more recently grown to become one of the more contagious strains of SARS-CoV-2, the deadly virus that causes COVID-19. Additionally, medical officials have indicated that the variant is much more resistant to vaccines than other strains.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, one of the leading medical professionals on the novel coronavirus, recently acknowledged that the Delta variant is likely to become the new dominant COVID-19 strain in the US, as it has begun to make up a bevy of new infection cases.

Noting how the Delta variant "exploded" in the UK over the last several months, Fauci remarked during a [Wednesday appearance](#) on NBC's "Today" that officials were able to ascertain that similar developments would emerge in the US once the strain made its way across the pond. With the Delta variant accounting for roughly 20% of the new COVID-19 cases, Fauci warned host Savannah Guthrie that the strain would more than likely become "quite dominant" within the next several weeks to a month, as it has proven to double over a short period of time.

"That's the sobering news," Fauci, who also serves as the director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stated.

Fauci's comments came a day after he declared during a White House briefing that the variant "is currently the greatest threat in the US" when it came to the ongoing effort by the Biden administration to eliminate the deadly virus.

Studies have proven that the Delta strain is about 60% more transmissible than other COVID-19 strains. In fact, [one study](#) recently determined that individuals infected with the Delta variant were twice as likely to end up hospitalized than those with the Alpha variant.

The Delta variant has been documented across dozens of countries, but in the US, it has managed to emerge largely in areas with low vaccination rates. A [survey](#) by Bloomberg found that in some 485 counties across the US, less than 25% of local populations have been fully vaccinated against the virus.

At present, figures from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that just over 45% of the American population has been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, with nearly 54% having received at least one dose of an available vaccine.

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Video: Conan O'Brien Smokes Weed on Air as His Long-Running, Late-Night TV Show Ends

The long-time, late-night comedian is ending the run of his eponymous TBS talk show "Conan," which debuted in 2010, to move onto further projects with the streaming platform HBO Max that will reportedly see him launch a weekly variety series.

To celebrate the show's run, Conan O'Brien and longtime sidekick Andy Richter shared a marijuana joint with actor Seth Rogen on Tuesday night's episode, a move that prompted a chorus of cheers and applause in the studio.

In addition to his roles in movies like "Knocked Up," "Steve Jobs," and "Long Shot," Rogen is a well-known cannabis connoisseur who has founded and invested in several marijuana-related businesses.

The not-so-shocking moment with Rogen came after O'Brien admitted he would be having "a lot of free time now" that he is parting from the nightly show. After the late-night host asks Rogen how best to fill his time, Rogen responds with: "I would suggest, and this would be hilariously on brand: try smoking a lot of weed for a long time."

Cue the laughter and applause, folks.

O'Brien quickly admitted that while he doesn't have a "problem" with marijuana, it's not an herb he often chooses to smoke, explaining that "the couple of times I've tried it, nothing really happened."

"But, I know you own a weed company... you know me, what would you want me smoking?" O'Brien asks Rogen, who in turn immediately produces a marijuana joint from his shirt pocket that he then proceeds to offer to O'Brien.

"This is how lame I am: for a second, I thought 'he brought a birthday candle?'" O'Brien jokes.

Before lighting the jay, O'Brien says to the crowd, "this is the kind of thing you do when you know it's over for you." He then proceeds to take a puff before passing it to Rogen, who takes a quick hit before passing it to O'Brien's sidekick Richter, who also indulges.

"I'm so happy with what just happened," a giggly, giddy Rogen later exclaims. O'Brien subsequently asks if it's "supposed to burn," admitting "it kinda burns in there," referring to his throat.

Rogen later addressed the encounter on social media, acknowledging in a tweet that he "was legit terrified that I got [O'Brien] too high haha." The actor noted that the "surreal and shocking" exchange was "genuinely unplanned."

O'Brien merely [commented](#) that "this wasn't how I expected tonight's show to go."

Other netizens chimed in with their mostly positive reactions to seeing the moment.

O'Brien, Rogen, and Richter's embrace of the drug mirrors nationwide trends, as just this week, Connecticut became the 18th state to legalize recreational marijuana.

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Trump to Hold 'Save America' Rally on July 3 in Florida - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump will hold a rally on July 3 in the state of Florida, his office said in a press release.

"Donald J. Trump, 45th President of the United States of America, will hold a major rally in Sarasota, Florida, on Saturday, July 3, 2021," the release said on Wednesday.

The rally is co-sponsored by the Republican Party of Florida, the release noted, and will begin at 8:00 p.m. EST (midnight GMT).

The rally will conclude with a "huge" fireworks show, the release said.

Trump has so far scheduled two rallies, the first one set to take place on Saturday in Wellington, Ohio.

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First Person Sentenced in Connection to January 6 US Capitol Riot - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Anna Morgan Lloyd has been sentenced to three years of probation for taking part in the January 6 riot at the US Capitol, making her the first person sentenced for participating in the siege, ABC News reported.

Morgan, 49, of the state of Indiana, pleaded guilty to one count of parading, demonstrating, or picketing in a captiol building, the report said on Wednesday.

Morgan has also been ordered to complete 40 hours of community service and pay \$500 in restitution, the report said.

Earlier in the day, FBI Director Christopher Wray said a little more than 500 people have been arrested in connection to the attack. He added that hundreds of more investigations and more serious charges are expected.

On January 6, a group of supporters of the former US President Donald Trump entered the US Capitol to protest lawmakers certifying Joe Biden's election victory.

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Yellen to Congress: Raise US Debt Ceiling Urgently as Default Would Be 'Unthinkable'

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Congress would do well to raise the US debt ceiling ahead of the July 31 deadline as a default on the United States' debt would be unthinkable, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said during a congressional budget hearing.

"Failing to increase the debt limit would have absolutely catastrophic economic consequences," Yellen said on Wednesday. "It would be utterly unprecedented in American history for the United States government to default on its obligations."

Yellen said failure by Congress to act would precipitate a financial crisis that would threaten the jobs and savings of Americans, particularly at a time when the economy is still recovering from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Defaulting on the national debt should be regarded as unthinkable," she added.

Yellen's remarks came after some Republican lawmakers warned they will not support a suspension of the debt ceiling unless the Biden administration agreed to cut spending or take other debt reduction measures. Senate Republican leaders said there will not be enough votes in the chamber to pass a "clean" debt ceiling increase, setting President Joe Biden up for a potentially disastrous outcome.

Yellen warned the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic restrictive measures has limited the Treasury Department's ability to know how long it can avert a default.

"We can't tolerate any chance of defaulting on the government debt, and there is a lot of uncertainty. It's possible that we could reach that point," Yellen said, adding that there could be overruns by as early as August.

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Biden Says Traditional Summer Spike in Crime Might Get Worse as Pandemic Eases

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said during a press conference that the traditional spike in crime during the summer months might get worse as the coronavirus pandemic eases.

"Crime historically rises during the summer and, as we emerge from this pandemic with the country opening back up again, the traditional summer spike may be more pronounced than it usually would be," Biden said on Wednesday.

Biden and US Attorney General Merrick Garland announced steps to crack down on what the Biden administration calls are shady gun dealers.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) will initiate proceedings to revoke the license of dealers that willfully violate the law by failing to conduct required background checks or falsifying records, Garland said.

On Tuesday, the Biden administration announced it will set up five new task forces to launch a concerted drive on illegal gun trafficking trade in order to reduce violent crime across the United States. The five strike forces will focus on significant firearms trafficking corridors that channel guns into New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area and Washington, DC and will be led by designated US attorneys.

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US Warns Pfizer, Moderna Vaccine Recipients to Watch for Enlarged Heart Symptoms - CDC

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The US government continues to recommend coronavirus vaccinations for everyone 12 years of age and older, albeit with a new warning to watch for symptoms of an enlarged heart reported by a fraction of people receiving the Pfizer or Moderna inoculation, the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention said.

"The known and potential benefits of COVID-19 vaccination outweigh the known and potential risks, including the possible risk of myocarditis or pericarditis [enlarged heart]. Also, most patients with myocarditis and pericarditis who received care responded well to treatment and rest and quickly felt better," the CDC said in a press release on Wednesday.

The release, however, urged vaccine recipients to "be on the lookout for any of the following symptoms: chest pain; shortness of breath; feelings of having a fast-beating, fluttering, or pounding heart" and to seek medical care if any of the symptoms occur following the first or second jab.

The US Food and Drug Administration is expected to add similar warnings accompanying both vaccines, according to media reports.

The CDC release was issued following a day in which the agency's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) began reviewing reports of myocarditis connected with the two vaccines - the most detailed data coming from the Israeli Health Ministry, according to one presentation.

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US Adds 5 Chinese Companies to Export Restrictions List Over Human Rights Abuses

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The US government placed five Chinese companies on its Entity List that restricts their ability to receive exports, the Commerce Department said in a document.

"Specifically, the [End-User Review Committee] determined that Xinjiang GCL New Energy Material Technology, Co. Ltd; Xinjiang Daqo New Energy, Co. Ltd; Xinjiang East Hope Nonferrous Metals Co. Ltd.; Hoshine Silicon Industry (Shanshan) Co., Ltd.; and Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps are engaging in activities contrary to the foreign policy interests of the United States through participating in the practice of, accepting, or utilizing forced labor," the document said on Wednesday.

The End-User Review Committee - composed of representatives from the departments of Commerce, State, Defense, Energy and Treasury - makes all decisions regarding modifications to the Entity List. The committee requires a majority vote in order to add an entity and a unanimous vote to remove one.

The US government alleges the five Chinese entities have committed human rights violations and abuse against Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other minorities in the Xinjiang region of China, including being engaged in a campaign of repression, mass arbitrary detention, forced labor and high-tech surveillance.

The five companies will have additional license requirements and limited availability of most license exceptions for exports, reexports and transfers to them.

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US Inflation Expected to Return Back to 'Normal' By End of 2022 - Yellen

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Inflation in the United States is expected to be back to normal by the end of next year, averaging below 5 percent, as the economy makes further recovery, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said during a congressional hearing.

"I believe that after this year is over, inflation rates will go back to normal," Yellen said on Wednesday. "By the end of this year, I expect inflation to be 5 percent or less. But if you take the monthly number and ask what would inflation be if it continued at that base for the rest of next year, I believe it will come down toward 2 percent."

Yellen's remarks came a day after Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said US inflation may be higher than usual now, but was unlikely to get as bad as it did in the 1970s, known as the "decade of inflation" in the United States.

The average US inflation rate then was 6.8 percent, nearly triple the rate of the previous two decades and double the long-run historical average.

Powell himself was commenting after the core Personal Consumption Expenditure Index used by the US central bank to monitor inflation expanded by a multiyear high of 3.1 percent in April from a year ago.

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Biden Says Traditional Summer Spike in Crime Might Get Worse as Pandemic Eases

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"Crime historically rises during the summer and, as we emerge from this pandemic with the country opening back up again, the traditional summer spike may be more pronounced than it usually would be," Biden said on Wednesday.

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US Evaluates Coronavirus Vaccinations During Pregnancies - National Institutes of Health

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US medical authorities have launched a new study to evaluate the responses of pregnant women and those who have just delivered their babies to the coronavirus vaccines, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced.

"NIH begins study of COVID-19 vaccination during pregnancy and postpartum," the health agency said in a press release on Wednesday. "Researchers will evaluate antibody responses in vaccinated participants and their infants."

In the study, researchers will measure the development and durability of antibodies against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, in people vaccinated during pregnancy or the first two postpartum months, the release said.

"Researchers also will assess vaccine safety and evaluate the transfer of vaccine-induced antibodies to infants across the placenta and through breast milk," the release added.

The study, called MOMI-VAX, is sponsored and funded by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), part of the National Institutes of Health, according to the release.

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Biden Nominates Ex-NSC Director for Russia Michael Carpenter for US Ambassador to OSCE

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden nominated former Director for Russia in the National Security Council Michael Carpenter to serve as United States envoy to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the White House announced.

"Today, President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate... Michael Carpenter... for US Representative to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), with rank of ambassador," the statement said on Wednesday.

At present, Carpenter serves as Managing Director of the Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement at the University of Pennsylvania. Prior to his current engagement, he served as Director for Russia at the National Security Council and also as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia. Carpenter also worked as Special Adviser for Europe and Eurasia in the Office of the Vice President.

Biden also nominated Cindy McCain, the widow of US Senator and 2008 Republican presidential nominee John McCain, to serve as US Representative to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

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Egypt Passes Second Financial Review to Get \$1.7Bln in Emergency Funding Support - IMF

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Egypt has passed its second financial review that cleared the country to receive \$1.7 billion in Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) financial support to see it through the coronavirus pandemic crisis, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced. "The Executive Board of the IMF completed the second and final review of Egypt's economic reform program supported by a 12-month SBA, allowing the authorities to draw SDR [Special Drawing Rights] 1,158.04 million (about \$1.7 billion)," the IMF said in news release on Wednesday.

The process brings Egypt's total purchases of financial support from the IMF to SDR 3,763.64 million (about \$5.4 billion or 184.8 percent of quota), the release explained.

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US Condemns Ethiopian Bombing Strike on Tigray Village Market – State Department

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) – The US government strongly condemns the bombing of a village market in Tigray Province by Ethiopian Air Force planes on Tuesday, Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"The United States is gravely concerned by reports that dozens of civilians were killed or injured during a bombing of a village market in northern Tigray on June 22," Price said in a statement.

"We strongly condemn this reprehensible act."

Price also noted what he described as "credible reports" that Ethiopian security forces denied medical personnel access to the victims of the attack. More than 50 people were killed, more than 100 were injured in the airstrike and at least 33 are reported missing, according to reports.

"Denying victims who urgently needed medical care is heinous and absolutely unacceptable. We urge the Ethiopian authorities to ensure full and unhindered medical access to the victims immediately," Price said.

According to eyewitnesses, the shell exploded on Tuesday afternoon in the town of Togoga on a market day. The US government called for an urgent and independent investigation to hold those responsible for the attack accountable and repeated its call for an immediate ceasefire in Tigray and protection for civilians, Price said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik)

BERLIN CONFERENCE ON LIBYA

- * The participants in the Berlin conference on Libya noted a significant improvement in the situation in the North African country compared to last year, according to a joint statement issued on Wednesday.

- * The conference participants pledged to comply with the arms embargo against Libya in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council resolution, the statement said.

- * All conference participants except Turkey supported the demand for withdrawal of foreign troops and mercenaries from Libya and also for a reform of the country's security sector that they said should be placed under a unified civilian authority and oversight, the statement said.

- * Russia believes that the situation in Libya is going in the right direction thanks to the adopted international decisions, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said.

AFGHANISTAN

- * Turkey is not planning to send additional troops to Afghanistan to guard the Kabul airport, Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said on Wednesday.

- * The US intelligence community estimates that the Afghan government could collapse six months after the withdrawal of American troops from the country, media reported.

- * The Biden administration believes that it spared US troops in Afghanistan from increased violence by initiating their withdrawal, the White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters.

US-VENEZUELA TENSIONS

- * The United States is targeting Venezuela's power grid to intimidate the nation and enable drug trafficking, Venezuelan Deputy Defense Minister Adm. Alexander Velasquez Bastidas said on Wednesday.

NORD STREAM 2

- * The United States still considers the Russia-led Nord Stream 2 project to be dangerous for Ukrainian and European energy security and urged Germany to take steps to mitigate the risks,

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday after meeting with German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas.

* Germany is ready to ensure that the Russia-led Nord Stream 2 pipeline project is not used against the interests of Ukraine, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said on Wednesday after meeting with Blinken.

UN RESOLUTION AGAINST US EMBARGO ON CUBA

* The UN General Assembly on Wednesday adopted a resolution calling for the end to the US economic embargo against Cuba, General Assembly President Volkan Bozkir said following the vote.

* The United States and Israel were the only countries that voted against the adoption of the resolution, while Ukraine, Colombia and the United Arab Emirates abstained.

* The resolution requests UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to issue a report on the implementation of the measure and submit it to the General Assembly during its 76th session.

SYRIA DEVELOPMENTS

* Militants, together with the White Helmets group, are preparing a staged "chemical attack" in the Idlib de-escalation zone, Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria deputy head Vadim Kulit said on Wednesday.

* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on Wednesday on the Security Council to reach an agreement to extend the cross-border humanitarian delivery mechanism in Syria for another year before its mandate expires on July 10.

* Guterres said the United Nations is discussing with Turkey and groups in control of the area the launching of cross-line humanitarian assistance from within Syria.

OIL MARKETS

* Crude oil inventories in the United States fell 7.61 million barrels for the week ending on June 18 versus the draw of 3.94 million barrels forecast by analysts polled by US media, making it the lowest weekly reading for crude stocks since March 2020, the Energy Information Administration said on Wednesday.

* Bahrain's National Oil and Gas Authority (NOGA) and Italy's energy giant Eni have announced the drilling of the first exploration oil well in the territorial waters of the Gulf country, the state-run Bahrain News Agency reported.

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US Envoy to UN Says Security Council Must Vote for Cross-Border Aid Renewal in Syria

UNITED NATIONS, June 23 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council has an obligation to vote to support the renewal of the cross-border humanitarian aid delivery mechanism in northwestern Syria next month, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Wednesday.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have an obligation to extend the mandate. Colleagues, we must vote for renewal," Thomas-Greenfield said at a UN Security Council meeting on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

The Security Council is set to vote on July 11 on a resolution to extend the aid delivery mechanism through the Bab Al-Hawa crossing from Turkey for another year.

Authorized by the council in 2014, the mechanism initially allowed the United Nations and humanitarian partners to bring aid to Syria through four border crossings from Turkey, Iraq and Jordan without prior consent from Damascus.

In January 2020, a resolution adopted by the council reduced the number of crossing points from four to two from Turkey for six months. Last July, the Security Council adopted another resolution that authorized aid deliveries using one crossing point - Bab Al-Hawa from Turkey for a year.

Both changes were taken following Russia's and China's opposition to reauthorizing the mechanism as it was. The two permanent members of the Security Council used their veto power to block attempts by other member states to keep the crossings open.

Russia had argued humanitarian aid could be delivered using cross-lines from within Syria and previously indicated that it would advocate for the closing of the last remaining crossing point in July.

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Oxford Scientists Test Ivermectin Drug as Potential Treatment For COVID-19 – Release

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) – United Kingdom researchers are investigating ivermectin, a widely used anti-parasitic drug, as a possible treatment for COVID-19 in a University of Oxford trial, Oxford's Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences said on Wednesday.

"From today, ivermectin is being investigated in the UK as part of the Platform Randomised Trial of Treatments in the Community for Epidemic and Pandemic Illnesses (PRINCIPLE), the world's largest clinical trial of possible COVID-19 treatments for recovery at home," the department said in a press release.

PRINCIPLE is one of the UK government's national priority platform trials of COVID-19 treatments, and the world's largest currently taking place in community settings looking for treatments at home, the release explained.

"For COVID-19, ivermectin has shown promising results as a potential treatment in small studies in humans. Anyone eligible and with COVID-19 symptoms can join the trial from anywhere in the UK ... The study has so far recruited more than 5,000 volunteers from across the UK," the release said.

Ivermectin is a safe, broad spectrum anti-parasitic drug that is in wide use globally to treat infections and has been shown to reduce SARS-CoV-2 replication in laboratory studies. Small pilot studies show it can reduce viral load and the duration of symptoms in some patients, the Nuffield department said.

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Over 400,000 Americans Treated in Hospitals After Dealing With Police Since 2015 - Report

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - More than 400,000 people have been treated in emergency rooms at medical facilities as a result of violent interactions with police since 2015, according to a report by NBC News and the Marshall Project on Wednesday.

The report revealed that while arrests rarely include use of force by police, more than half of the incidents when force is used resulted in a suspect or civilian getting injured.

NBC and the Marshall Project, a nonprofit news organization centered on justice system issues, pointed out that there is a lack of comprehensive national data on hospitalizations and injuries resulting from interactions with police.

Many of the 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States do not record the number of people who require medical care after violent interactions with police, including when officers break their arms, bruise them or shock them with tasers, the report said.

The news outlets based the 400,000 injury estimate on emergency room data from multiple US cities dating back to 2015 plus data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In addition hospital treatment rates obtained by NBC and police use of force data from four large police departments from 2017-2020, showed that between 30 percent and 40 percent of police use of force incidents resulted in hospitalizations in the US cities of San Jose, California; Denver, Colorado; Mesa, Arizona and Chicago, Illinois, the report said.

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Militia-Linked US Capitol Rioter Pleads Guilty to January 6-Related Charges - Court Docs

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Graydon Young, a 54-year old from Florida with connections to the right-wing Oath Keepers organization, pleaded guilty on Wednesday to felony charges of conspiracy and obstruction of an official proceeding in relation to the January 6 Capitol Riots.

Young pleaded guilty before Judge Amit P. Mehta in a federal court as part of a plea deal in which he will also have to cooperate with law enforcement investigators. He also agreed to pay restitution to the Treasury Department in the amount of \$2,000 as part of the deal.

He admitted in a statement of offense to co-conspiring with members of the Oath Keepers organization prior and during the US Capitol Riots back on January 6 in an effort to obstruct, influence, and impede Congress's certification of the Electoral College vote.

Young also waived his right to a trial by jury as part of the first guilty plea from someone charged in the Oath Keepers conspiracy case, which is tied to a total of 16 different individuals.

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Lawmakers Call for Magnitsky Audit of Hong Kong Officials' Assets in Canada - Letter

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - A group of Canadian lawmakers on Wednesday called on the federal government to conduct an audit of Hong Kong officials' financial and personal connections to identify potential targets for Magnitsky law sanctions.

"We hope that the government will move swiftly to undertake an audit of the financial and personal connections Hong Kong officials have in Canada and work with likeminded partners to enact coordinated Magnitsky sanctions against individuals responsible for the dramatic erosion of Hong Kong's freedoms, autonomy and the rule of law," the letter to Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said.

The 20 undersigned Canadian members of parliament and senators designated Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung and Secretary of Justice Teresa Cheng, among seven other top officials, as specific targets of the probe.

The letter is part of a growing diplomatic rift between Ottawa and Beijing and comes a day after Canadian and Chinese diplomats sparred over allegations of human rights abuses at a United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) meeting.

Sino-Canadian relations soured after Canadian authorities detained Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in 2018 at the request of the United States to which China is alleged to have responded by arresting two Canadian nationals on charges of espionage. The tense relationship has been further exacerbated by Canada's condemnation of the Chinese law on national security in Hong Kong.

Chinese officials have said Canada's deference to US foreign policy served as a catalyst for the growing diplomatic rift.

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US Linguist Gets 23 Year Sentence For Giving Hezbollah Names of US Agents - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) – A linguist for the US military who gave the Lebanese paramilitary group Hezbollah names of human intelligence sources following the January 2020 US strike that killed Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani received a 23-year prison term for her efforts, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"When she was arrested by the FBI on Feb. 27, 2020, [Mariam] Thompson had used her access to classified national defense information to provide her co-conspirator with the identities of at least eight clandestine human assets; at least 10 U.S. targets; and multiple tactics, techniques and procedures," Justice said in a press release. "Thompson intended and had reason to

believe that this classified national defense information would be used to the injury of the United States and to the advantage of Lebanese Hezbollah.”

Thompson, a contract linguist, began an assignment at a US Special Operations Task Force facility in Iraq weeks before the January 2020 US strike that killed Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the founder of an Iranian-backed Iraqi militia, the release said.

At the request of an unindicted Lebanese co-conspirator with ties to Hezbollah, Thompson used her top-secret security clearance to access files identifying intelligence sources that helped enable the US strike. She then used multiple techniques to provide names and photographs of the sources, along with detailed accounts of information the sources had provided to the US government, the release added.

As part of her March 26 guilty plea, Thompson admitted that she believed that the classified information that she was passing to a Lebanese national would be provided to Hezbollah, designated as a terrorist organization by the US.

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US Border Patrol Chief Rodney Scott Stepping Down From Post - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US Border Patrol Chief Rodney Scott will soon step down from his post, CNN reported on Wednesday citing a source familiar with the matter.

Border Patrol Deputy Chief Raul Ortiz will take over command as acting chief, the report said. US Customs and Border Protection did not immediately respond for comment, the report said. Scott has served in the Border Patrol since 1992 and took over as chief in February 2020.

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Guterres Strongly Appeals to UNSC to Extend Cross-Border Mechanism in Syria For 1 Year

UNITED NATIONS, June 23 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on Wednesday on the UN Security Council to reach an agreement to extend the cross-border humanitarian delivery mechanism in Syria for another year ahead of its mandate's expiration on July 10.

“I strongly appeal to the members of the Council to reach consensus on allowing cross border operations as a vital channel of support for another year,” Guterres said.

Guterres also stated the United Nations is currently discussing with Turkey and groups in control of the area the launching of cross-line humanitarian assistance from within Syria.

“We are in dialogue with Turkey and groups in control of the area, and I have strong hopes that it will be possible to start cross-line operations soon,” Guterres said.

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US Troops Would Have Faced Increased Attacks If Ordered to Stay in Afghanistan – Psaki

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) – The White House believes that it spared its troops in Afghanistan from increased violence by initiating their withdrawal from the country, the White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

"We have not seen an increase in attacks on our military presence since February 2020. And we also assess that had we not begun to draw down violence would have increased against us as well after May 1 because that was what the Taliban was clearly conveying. So the status quo in our view was not an option," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

The United States has pulled more than half of its contingent from Afghanistan and vows to finalize the withdrawal by September 11, 2021. Psaki reiterated that the timeline will not be revised.

She admitted to "elevated attacks" on Afghan security forces and the country's government versus a year ago. Psaki refused to comment on media reports that the US intelligence community now estimates that the government of Afghanistan may fall within six months after the US withdrawal.

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US Puts Anti-Dumping Duty on Korean, Taiwanese, Thai Tire Imports - Commerce Dept

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The United States will impose anti-dumping duties on tires for passenger vehicles and light trucks imported from Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand after an investigation determined they were underpriced to hurt US tire-makers, the Commerce Department said on Wednesday.

The probe found that Korean, Taiwanese and Thai buyers of these tires were subsidized by Vietnam, the country where they were manufactured, enabling the products to be re-exported to the United States at below fair value. It also found that Vietnam itself sold little of those tires directly to the US market, and thus, anti-dumping duty on such Vietnamese tires will be removed.

"Commerce will issue antidumping duty orders on imports of these products from Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand, and a countervailing duty order on imports of these products from Vietnam," a statement from the department said.

US passenger vehicle and light truck tire sales are expected to reach \$114 million in value in 2021, Databridge Market Research said.

Thailand accounts for the largest share of such US tire imports, with the Asian country supplying the United States some 37 million passenger car tires and around 7.7 million light truck tires in 2019, trade data showed.

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Canadian Economy to Take 1.4% Hit for Trudeau to Realize 2030 Climate Ambitions - Study

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) – The Canadian economy will contract by 1.4 percent in order for the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to meet its 2030 greenhouse gas emission reduction ambitions, the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) said on Wednesday. The governing Liberal Party has twice promised to reduce carbon dioxide emissions below Canada's 2030 Paris Climate Accord targets, most recently pledging to reduce emissions by 36 percent below the end-of-decade goal in the 2021 Federal Budget.

"The combined price- and non-price-based measures in HEHE [government's 2020 A Healthy Environment and a Healthy Economy plan] and Budget 2021 would reduce the projected level of real GDP in 2030 by 1.4 per cent," the PBO said in its study titled Beyond Paris: Reducing Canada's GHG Emissions By 2030.

Canada's parliamentary budget watchdog said that aside from the increase to the price-per-ton on carbon dioxide emissions to \$138.27 by 2030, the government would need to implement further non-price and regulatory measures to achieve its goals.

The country's oil and gas sectors would bear the brunt of the measures, the study said, while heavy industry would reap the benefits of being able to tap into alternative sources of energy, which are not taxed under the federal carbon pricing plan.

The Trudeau government has made combating climate change a priority, signing onto the Paris Climate Accord and vowing to exceed targets set at the 2016 summit prematurely. The government's efforts have, however, faced strong criticism from both the political left and right, with Trudeau being concurrently accused of consistently missing existing climate targets and undermining the Canadian resource sector.

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Migrant Hunger Strikers in US Face Abusive Force Feeding, Solitary Confinement - Report

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Migrants who begin hunger strikes in US immigrant detention facilities face a litany of involuntary invasive medical procedures and retaliation, including force-feeding, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) said in a report on Wednesday.

"Internal ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] documents... spotlight an array of punitive and egregious practices weaponized against hunger strikers, such as: Force-feeding, forced hydration, forced urinary catheterization, and other involuntary and invasive medical procedures," a press release explaining the report said.

Other measures deployed to break hunger strikes include solitary confinement, retaliatory deportations, tear gassing and separation of hunger striking parents from children in family detention facilities, the release said.

The report, based on 10,000 pages of documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act plus interviews with former detainees, covers hunger strikes by at least 1,378 people from 74 countries across 62 public and private immigration detention centers in 24 US states from 2013 to 2017.

"The fact that ICE systemically responds to these strikes - which are free speech protected by the First Amendment - with coercion and violence, instead of a good faith effort to respond to the needs raised by detained people, speaks to the inherently abusive and inhumane nature of immigration detention," senior staff attorney at the ACLU's National Prison Project Eunice Cho said in the release.

The report urged the Biden administration to halt the use of punitive measures against hunger strikers and dismantle what it called was an abusive system that leads detainees to protest by refusing to eat.

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Blinken Urges Germany to Reduce Risks Posed by Nord Stream 2 – State Department

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged German Chancellor Angela Merkel to take steps to mitigate the risks to Ukraine and Western Europe related to Nord Stream 2 pipeline, the State Department said in a statement on Wednesday. "Secretary Blinken underscored continued US opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and encouraged Germany to take concrete steps to reduce the risks it poses to Ukraine and European energy security," read the statement issued after Blinken's meeting with Merkel in Berlin.

Both sides emphasized the importance of a coordinated Transatlantic approach to addressing global challenges, including those posed by the People's Republic of China and Russia, it added.

"They also discussed the COVID-19 recovery, responding to the climate crisis, and our shared interest in a just and durable political settlement in Afghanistan," the State Department noted. Blinken and Merkel also expressed their support for national elections in Libya and called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries, the statement said.

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US Preparing for Next Supply Chain Crisis - Biden Economic Adviser

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is preparing for its next supply chain crisis by ensuring that enough domestic production will at least partially meet demand for critical raw materials like microchips, President Joe Biden's economic adviser Brian Deese said on Wednesday.

"Today, we're living through real-time bottlenecks in the semiconductor industry that ... we're working to try to resolve those in the very immediate term, but the real answer for the US is to build resilience by building back domestic capability, not to source all semiconductors here in the United States but have enough capacity here, enough innovation here and enough production here that we don't find ourselves exposed," Deese said in a discussion hosted by the Atlantic Council.

Deese acknowledged that the current semiconductor shortage caused by the coronavirus pandemic restrictions might take years to resolve, but added it prompted the White House to plan to be better prepared when the next crisis strikes in another five to eight years.

US supply chains are struggling with near record-low inventories of homes and cars, as complications caused by the coronavirus pandemic restrictive measures leaving manufacturers with ten days less supply than a year ago for most goods, according to the White House report. The inventory deficit in microchips, framing lumber, wallboard and roofing materials was withholding business activity across industries from automaking to homebuilding, the report said.

Deese said it will take public investment and coordination between the public and private sector to tackle the issue.

"The goal is over five years from now, eight years from now, we put ourselves in a situation where when the next crisis, or the next set of challenges, inevitably hits, we're operating from a much stronger foundation," Deese added.

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Pedestrian Bridge Collapses in Washington, DC Leaving 6 Injured - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - A pedestrian bridge over a highway has collapsed in the US capital of Washington, DC leaving at least six people injured, local media reported on Wednesday.

The bridge fell onto three lanes of the roadway and is trapping a truck, NBC reported.

"#DCs Bravest Hazmat unit mitigating diesel fuel leak from truck that is partially beneath bridge," the Twitter statement added. "At least 1 other vehicle was struck by debris. Collapse blocks both directions."

DC Fire and EMS said via Twitter that four out of the six injured people have been transported to the hospital.

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UN General Assembly Adopts Resolution Urging US to End Economic Blockade on Cuba

UNITED NATIONS, June 23 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly, by an overwhelming majority, on Wednesday adopted a resolution calling for the end to the US economic embargo imposed against Cuba, the President of the General Assembly, Volkan Bozkir, said following the vote.

"The result of the vote is as follows: in favor - 184, against - two, abstentions - three. Draft resolution A/75/L.97 is adopted," Bozkir said.

The United States and Israel voted against the adoption of the resolution annually brought to the attention of the 193-member body. Colombia, Ukraine and the United Arab Emirates decided to abstain from voting on the document.

The resolution, titled "Necessity of ending the economic, commercial and financial embargo imposed by the United States of America against Cuba," voices concern about the continued application of laws, such as the Helms-Burton Act, affecting the sovereignty and legitimate interests of other states.

It urges member states that have and continue to apply such restrictions "to take the steps necessary to repeal or invalidate them as soon as possible in accordance with their legal regime."

The document also requests UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to issue a report on the implementation of the resolution and submit it to the General Assembly during its 76th session.

US restrictions on trade with Cuba date back to the island's communist revolution in the late 1950s and involve at least a half dozen different US laws. President Barack Obama took steps to normalize bilateral relations with the island, but many of those steps were reversed by the former Donald Trump administration.

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US Intelligence Estimates Afghan Govt. Could Fall 6 Months After Withdrawal - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The US intelligence estimates that the government of Afghanistan could collapse six months after the withdrawal of American troops from the country, the Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday.

The report said the US intelligence agencies revised their initial, more optimistic estimates after the Taliban opposition movement seized dozens of localities in northern Afghanistan.

The new forecast is believed to be shared by the US military, the report added.

The United States has already pulled more than half of its troops from Afghanistan and expects to complete the withdrawal by September 11.

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Blinken Urges Germany to Reduce Risks Posed by Nord Stream 2 – State Department

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged German Chancellor Angela Merkel to take steps to mitigate the risks to Ukraine and Western Europe related to Nord Stream 2 pipeline, the State Department said in a statement on Wednesday. "Secretary Blinken underscored continued US opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and encouraged Germany to take concrete steps to reduce the risks it poses to Ukraine and European energy security," read the statement issued after Blinken's meeting with Merkel in Berlin.

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Harris to Visit US Border With Mexico on Friday - White House

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris will visit the United States' southern border at the end of the week, the White House said on Wednesday. "Vice President Harris will travel to El Paso, Texas, on Friday. She will be accompanied by Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas," the White House said in a press release.

US Customs and Border Protection data revealed this month that the number of asylum-seeking migrants apprehended along the southern border with Mexico in May set another record, reaching a new 21-year monthly high of 180,034.

A total of 929,868 migrants have been apprehended illegally crossing the US-Mexico since October, putting the Biden administration on pace to break the previous annual record of 977,509 set in 2019.

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UN Chief 'Deeply Alarmed' By Deadly Airstrike on Tigray Market - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 23 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is deeply alarmed by the reports of an airstrike in Ethiopia's Tigray region that killed dozens of civilians, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, over 80 civilians have reportedly been killed by the airstrike targeting a market in the region's Togoga village.

"The Secretary-General is deeply alarmed by the reports of civilian casualties on this airstrike, which reportedly took place yesterday in Togoga," Dujarric said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the United Nations has requested to assess the situation and provide assistance, but so far, it has not been able to receive access to the area, Dujarric said.

The United Nations calls on all parties engaged in fighting in Tigray to do their utmost to protect civilians, end all hostilities and provide greater access for humanitarian workers, the spokesman said.

"Frankly, from what we've seen, things are not going in the right direction, to say the least," Dujarric added.

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UN Estimates 1.47M In Refugees to Be in Need of Resettlement in 2022 - Report

UNITED NATIONS, June 23 (Sputnik) - The number of refugees in need of resettlement is estimated to increase to 1.47 million next year, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said in a report released on Wednesday.

"In 2022, UNHCR estimates that global resettlement needs will slightly increase to 1,473,156 persons, as compared to 2021, when 1,445,383 were estimated to be in need of resettlement," the report said.

The UNHCR said the increase is anticipated in every region with the exception of Africa and Europe. However, even though the resettlement needs there decreased by 4 to 5 percent from last year, they are nevertheless estimated to have the highest resettlement needs in 2022, projected at 593,598 and 401,740, respectively.

With needs outpacing solutions however, the UNHCR has made an appeal to wealthier countries to create more available resettlement opportunities.

"Nearly 90 percent of the world's refugees are hosted in developing countries whose capacities were overstretched even before the pandemic," UNHCR International Protection chief Gillian Triggs said. "[They] are now forced to contend with worsening humanitarian conditions for local and displaced communities alike."

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Harris to Visit US Border With Mexico on Friday - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris will visit the United States' southern border at the end of the week, Politico reported on Wednesday citing sources familiar with the matter.

Harris is scheduled to visit the border city of El Paso in the state of Texas, the report said.

Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas will accompany Harris on the trip, the report added.

However, a Harris spokesperson as well as the spokesperson for the Homeland Security Secretary declined to comment.

US Customs and Border Protection data revealed this month that the number of asylum-seeking migrants apprehended along the southern border with Mexico in May set another record, reaching a new 21-year monthly high of 180,034.

A total of 929,868 migrants have been apprehended illegally crossing the US-Mexico since October, putting the Biden administration on pace to break the previous annual record of 977,509 set in 2019.

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At Least 60 Children Killed in Myanmar Since Military Coup - UN Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, June 23 (Sputnik) - At least 60 children have been killed by security forces in Myanmar since the country's military seized power on February 1, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"Our colleagues in the country team [in Myanmar] said they remain deeply concerned over the continued use of violence against children nearly five months after the military took over the government," Dujarric said. "As of this Monday, at least 60 children have reportedly been killed since February."

The United Nations calls on security forces to refrain from violence and keep children out of harm's way, Dujarric added.

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Americans' Pandemic Fears Fall to Record Low But 40% Still Wear Masks - Poll

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US citizens' fears over the COVID-19 have fallen to their lowest level since the pandemic began in early 2020, but some 40 percent are still wearing masks in public, a new Monmouth University poll revealed on Wednesday.

"Public anxiety about contracting Covid-19 has plummeted since the beginning of the year and stands at its lowest level since the pandemic began," Monmouth University said. "Poll results also find nearly four in ten Americans have not changed their mask-wearing habits despite new guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)."

However, the poll also reported that 20 percent of US adults remain opposed to getting vaccinated.

"Partisanship continues to be the key dividing line for both vaccine willingness and maintaining mask protocols," Monmouth University said.

Worries about a family member getting seriously ill from the coronavirus have plunged to an all-time low with 42 percent of Americans expressing concern about it happening. In previous polls since the pandemic started, that number ranged between 67 percent and 83 percent, it added.

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CARICOM Calls for Immediate, Unconditional End of US Embargo on Cuba - Haitian Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, June 23 (Sputnik) - The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) urged the United States to lift immediately and unconditionally the economic blockade it has imposed on Cuba, Haitian Ambassador to the United Nations Antonio Rodrigue said during a UN General Assembly meeting on Wednesday.

"We continue to reiterate our unequivocal opposition and rejection of the imposition of unilateral coercive measures, and to call for the immediate and unconditional end of the economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed on Cuba by the government of the United States of America," Rodrigue said on behalf of the CARICOM member states.

Rodrigue further reiterated CARICOM's rejection of the enforcement of extraterritorial laws and measures, such as the United States' Helms-Burton Act.

US restrictions on trade with Cuba date back to the island nation's communist revolution in the late 1950s and involve at least a half dozen different US laws. President Barack Obama took steps to normalize bilateral relations with the island, but many of those steps were reversed by the former administration of Donald Trump.

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US Crude Oil Inventories Hit Pre-Pandemic Lows as Demand Surges - Energy Agency EIA

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Weekly demand figures for oil in the United States are continuing to blow past industry estimates, with the Energy Information Administration (EIA) reporting on Wednesday another outsize consumption for last week that took crude inventories to lows last seen before the coronavirus pandemic.

Crude oil inventories fell 7.61 million barrels for the week ended June 18, the EIA reported, versus the draw of 3.94 million barrels forecast by analysts polled by US media. This makes it the lowest weekly reading for crude stocks since March 2020, the agency said.

Stockpiles of gasoline declined by 2.9 million barrels last week, versus expectations for a build of 833,00 barrels, the EIA added in its Weekly Petroleum Status report.

"The surprise in this report is the drawdown in gasoline inventories," said Adam Button, an economist at ForexLive. "Gasoline tightening up points to strong driving demand."

Oil prices jumped in response to the bullish crude and gasoline draws.

West Texas Intermediate crude, the benchmark for US oil, was at \$73.64 per barrel by 11:05 AM ET (15:05 GMT), up 79 cents, or 1.1 percent. WTI touched \$74.23 earlier, its highest since October 2018.

Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil, was at \$75.69, up 88 cents, or 1.2 percent, after scaling a session high of \$76, also a peak since October 2018.

Only inventories of distillates showed sluggish numbers reported by the EIA. This category, which includes diesel and heating oil, grew by 1.75 million barrels, overshooting forecasts for a rise of 1.0 million.

Exports of US crude, meanwhile, remained red-hot at 3.65 million barrels per day versus the previous week's 3.89 million.

US production of crude itself remained anemic at an estimated 11.1 million barrels daily versus the previous week's 11.2 million, although this looked set to increase with the price of WTI nearing \$75 per barrel.

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US Has No Better Friend Than Germany - Blinken

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) – The United States does not have a better friend in the world than Germany, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"The United States has no better friend in the world than Germany. It starts with shared values and shared interests, but also with a shared conviction of all of the challenges that we face," Blinken said during his meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Blinken pointed out that both countries have acknowledged the importance of bilateral cooperation and are committed to work with their allies internationally.

"There is a premium, maybe more than ever before, on cooperation, on coordination, on working with others, and Germany has set an example in doing just that," he said.

Blinken emphasized that the Biden administration has focused on reinvigorating US alliances and engagement in multilateral institutions.

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US Embargo Caused Over \$5Bln in Losses For Cuba's Economy in 2020 - Russia's Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, June 23 (Sputnik) - The embargo imposed by the United States against Cuba exceeded \$5 billion in losses for Havana's economy for the first time last year, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said at a UN General Assembly meeting on Wednesday.

The General Assembly earlier in the day gathered for an in-person meeting to address the necessity of ending the US economic, commercial and financial restrictions against Cuba and vote on a resolution calling to lift the sixty-year embargo.

"The total damage of the Cuban economy from the American sanctions in 2020 increased by almost 30 percent compared with 2019 and for the first time exceeded 5 billion US dollars," Nebenzia said.

The diplomat pointed out that at the time of the global crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic last year, Washington undertook "entirely inhumane" steps against Havana that hampered Cuba's and other countries' fight against the coronavirus.

"The American campaign to discredit Cuban doctors as well as sanctions against the biopharmaceutical industry are absolutely unprincipled and inhumane and have jeopardized the health of thousands of ordinary people in many countries of the world," Nebenzia said.

Nebenzia further called for the immediate lifting of the "illegitimate" US embargo that he said limits the inalienable rights not only of citizens of Cuba but citizens of the United States.

According to the diplomat, the total harm to Cuba due to the US embargo has reached \$144 billion since its introduction in 1962.

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US Birth Rates Suffer Biggest Decline in Nearly 50 Years During Pandemic - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US births plunged in 2020 for all races as the coronavirus pandemic took hold, registering the largest drop in nearly a half century, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said in a report on Wednesday.

"The number of births declined for all race and Hispanic-origin groups from 2019 to 2020, with declines ranging from 3 percent (Hispanic women) to 8 percent (non-Hispanic Asian women)," the report said. "The US general fertility rate also declined 4 percent percent from 2019 to 2020, the largest percent decline in this [overall] rate in nearly five decades."

The impact of the pandemic on fertility in 2020 varied by month as the number of coronavirus infections in the United States rose from 26 cases in early March to more than 20 million at the end of December, with the biggest declines from July through the end of the year, the report said.

For the second half of 2020, births declined in all 50 US states and Washington, DC. In contrast, during the second six months 2018 compared with the same period in 2019, births fell for 9 states, increased in five states and did not change significantly for 36 states and Washington, DC, the report added.

The CDC said the report was based on a tally of all birth certificates in the United States.

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New US Home Sales Down 6% in May Amid Tight Supply - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - New home sales in the United States fell almost 6 percent in May, the Commerce Department said on Wednesday.

Sales of new single family houses in May were at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 769,000, according to estimates released earlier today.

"This is 5.9 percent below the revised April rate of 817,000," the Commerce Department said in a statement.

However, year-on-year, sales were up 9.2 percent above the May 2020 estimate of 704,000, the statement said.

The new home sales data was in line with US home sales numbers reported by the National Association of Realtors (NAR) on Tuesday that cited a near 3 percent decline in April for a third month in a row. NAR said fewer houses came on the market in April to match demand that remained up double-digits for the year despite record high prices.

The median existing-home price for all housing types in April was at a record high \$341,600, up 19.1 percent from the April 2020 median of \$286,800, as every US region recorded increases, NAR said.

The housing market is one of the cornerstones of the US economy, accounting for nearly 15 percent of Gross Domestic Product. House prices in the United States have risen every year without for nearly ten years now, appreciating even during the height of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

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US Targets Crime With COVID-19 Relief Funds for Social Programs, Local Policing - Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration urged state and local governments to use COVID-19 recovery funds to fight violent crime, especially gun violence, according to guidance issued by the US Treasury Department on Wednesday.

The Treasury Department recommended that State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds included in the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act be invested in "community policing, community violence interruption, and other programs that are proven to reduce crime."

"We hope that with this guidance, communities can use these funds to build a holistic, evidence-based approach to combating violence, especially gun violence, through strategies ranging from subsidized employment and behavioral health programming, to Community Violence Intervention programs and community policing," Treasury Department Chief Recovery Officer Jacob Leibenluft said in a press release explaining the guidance.

President Joe Biden and Attorney General Merrick Garland plan to announce an fresh offensive against violent crime Thursday afternoon that includes zero tolerance for illegal gun sales, according to the Justice Department.

Murder rates and shootings have surged in US cities, many of which have reduced police budgets amid national debate over racism in police departments - concerns fueled by a spate of police shootings of African-American suspects.

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US Billionaire Warren Buffett Quits Gates Foundation Board, Gives \$4.1Bln to 5 Charities

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Billionaire philanthropist Warren Buffett resigned from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, while donating another \$4.1 billion of his vast fortune to five charities including the Gates organization, according to an announcement Wednesday on his Berkshire Hathaway investment company's website.

"Today is a milestone for me. In 2006, I pledged to distribute all of my Berkshire Hathaway shares - more than 99 percent of my net worth - to philanthropy. With today's \$4.1 billion distribution, I'm halfway there," Buffett said.

Buffett also resigned as a trustee of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, one of the five foundations slated to benefit from the billionaire's \$4.1 billion distribution.

"For years I have been a trustee - an inactive trustee at that - of only one recipient of my funds, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMG)," Buffett said.

Despite the resignation, Buffett added that his philanthropic goals were "100 percent in sync with those of the foundation, and my physical participation is in no way needed to achieve these goals."

The resignation comes at a tumultuous time for the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, with the divorce of its two founders.

In 2006, when Buffett pledged to give away his entire fortune, he owned 474,998 Berkshire class A shares. With the latest distribution, Buffett said he still owns 238,624 shares, worth about \$100 billion.

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IMF Chief Warns of Slow Economic Recovery, Mounting Debt in Africa Amid Pandemic

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva on Wednesday warned of slow economic recovery and mounting debt among African nations amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The warning signs are clear: a two-track pandemic is leading to a two-track recovery. Africa is already falling behind in terms of growth prospects," Georgieva said in prepared remarks at the African Development Bank annual meeting. "This year, we project the global economy to grow by 6 percent, but only half that — 3.2 percent — in Africa."

Georgieva acknowledged that the debt levels in Africa have increased sharply, having already been elevated before the pandemic.

"Public debt in sub-Saharan Africa jumped by more than 6 percentage points to 58 percent of GDP in 2020, the highest level in almost two decades," she noted, adding that in North Africa, it rose by about 12 percentage points to an average of 88 percent of GDP last year.

The IMF leader called on the international community to help the continent in solving these issues by providing support and modernizing international taxation. She welcomed global efforts on digital taxation,

Speaking of the IMF's role, Georgieva noted that it swiftly ramped up financing for Africa, including by providing 13 times the average annual lending to sub-Saharan Africa in one year.